
LETTERS

THE EDITOR:

I am offended that Dr. Donald Kaplan calls me “immodest” [T32] for asserting that the New Theatre is, indeed, new. As I said in my article [T30], which he has “studied,” “Completely original artists . . . do not exist” (p. 41); we know that all art is derived in one way or another, however slight, from preceding work and that nothing is *entirely* new. Although my book *Happenings* gives a more detailed survey of the historical influences on that particular segment of the New Theatre (including specific mention of the Marx Brothers and their appreciation by the Surrealists), I did sketch in the most important precursors in my article, indicating that the appellation “new” was meaningful because of significant differences from traditional theatre (particularly drama) in manner of performance structure, type of material, and performance-audience relationship, among other things. Unless Dr. Kaplan can coherently refute most of these points, I think he should examine more closely the reasons why he was “appalled” and refrain from insults. As it is, when he attempts to “prove” a point by quoting my mention of certain Events, he entirely misunderstands the issue.

In context, my sentences describing Events followed more than two pages discussing what I choose to call non-matrixed performing. Thus my emphasis in the lines quoted was on the *manner* of performance and not upon the performance *material*. Although the material in question has certain similarities to some vaudeville and burlesque, the manner of performance is quite different. Not

only are the “bits” of traditional humorous theatre—and I do not consider Events as primarily humorous, but that is another point—usually imbedded in an imaginary situation, story, place, etc., but character is a dominant element. The destruction of a piano by Groucho Marx, let us say, would not only be just another scene in a fictional narrative, but, under the name of the character he was playing, his manufactured and projected personality, attitudes, comments, and emotion would carry much of the total theatrical weight. In an Event, on the other hand, the destruction of the piano would be performed in much the same way that a symphony musician, for example, would play: with involvement, concentration, and emphasis on the objective “thing” produced, but without the creation and physicalization of personality elements. Although the Event performer does not attempt to hide whatever aspects of his own character happen to show, he can seem overtly self-effacing when compared with Groucho, *et al.*

As for Tzara, Dr. Kaplan in his Great Playwrights approach (“the line from *Hamlet* to Chekhov to Pirandello to Brecht, Genet, and Beckett, however, is our ‘real’ advance . . .”—in supporting the New Theatre do I really have to be *against* these writers?) seems unaware of the influence of Tzara’s *The Gas Heart* in particular and of Dada and Surrealism in general on Beckett, Genet, and much of modern French drama. It was ignorance of this vital tradition that once made *Waiting for Godot* such an aesthetic surprise in this country; there is no longer any excuse

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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
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for such ignorance. And is reference to Freud and Strindberg (among many others) a "tradition" or a "tradition gone wrong," Dr. Kaplan? The continent of Atlantis is richer, more heavily populated—and more real—than even certain psychoanalysts are willing to admit.

Michael Kirby

Donald M. Kaplan will reply to Mr. Kirby's letter in the next issue of TDR.

THE EDITOR:

I have searched in vain for Richard Hornby's name in my Alumni Directory for the Yale Drama School. And yet his review of Robert Brustein's two books in TDR [T32] criticizes Yale from the viewpoint of an unhappy insider.

Although at times I have been an unhappy student and a critical alumnus of Yale, Hornby's criticism baffles me. While using all the correct names, he criticizes the school for all the wrong reasons.

George Pierce Baker and Alexander Dean may have been influential in their day, but that was over a generation ago. Certainly enough time has passed for what influence they did have to be softened, modified, even reversed. After all, no one has ever claimed that they were founders of a cult whose followers allowed no alteration to the original principles.

. . . Another person that Hornby chooses to discredit is Donald Oenslager, whom he accuses of "failure to subordinate design to the demands of the play." As a former design student of Oenslager, I can testify that he has never suggested that design be anything but subordinate to the play. If anything, his major theme of instruction is that a design must grow from the needs of the play. Hornby has picked up this silly criticism of a great teacher and repeated it without knowing the facts.

The detractors of the Yale design department have latched onto the obvious fact that the designs for Yale's major productions are almost always superior to the acting. From this observation they conclude that design is considered a thing unto itself. In truth, it is merely the nature of the two arts that makes this imbalance possible, and even inevitable. Before the performance, the design student can stand back from his work, hear criticism, make changes, see the results, and thus, with